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SUBJECT: IN SOUTHEAST, DISPARATE KURDISH VOICES BLAME AKP
FOR SNAGS IN NATIONAL UNITY PROJECT

REF: ANKARA 71

Classified By: Adana Principal Officer Daria Darnell, reasons 1.4(b,d)

This is a Consulate Adana cable.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Adana Deputy PO, Ankara PolOff, and Washington DeskOff met with politicians, businessmen, intellectuals and local government officials in southeast Turkey to discuss the Kurdish issue. These disparate Kurdish voices were almost unanimous in faulting the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) for what they see as a halt in the "National Unity Project" and held AKP accountable for the ongoing detentions of members of the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) for alleged membership in the KCK, the political wing of the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). (Note: BDP has taken up the mantle of the banned Democratic Society Party (DTP) and has become the home of most of its former members. End Note.) Kurdish politicians and lawyers said the latest round of detentions, including 15 BDP mayors and more than 100 party members, had sparked a surge in PKK recruits, particularly university students. While some contacts agreed the Project had, at the very least, cracked open a once taboo subject, they voiced concern about the widening rift between Turks and Kurds at the community level. To get the process back on track, they claim, AKP should take concrete steps on legal reforms to reassure Kurdish voters of its sincerity and engage Kurdish stakeholders as partners in the effort. END SUMMARY.

THE SOUTHEAST BLAMES THE AKP

¶2. (C) On a recent four-day trip in the southeast, Adana Deputy Principle Officer, Ankara PolOff and Washington DeskOff met with a range of contacts representing the business, academic, political and local government sectors. Almost all interlocutors -- especially members of the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), inheritor of the DTP legacy -- were united in blaming AKP for halting the National Unity Project, citing the following factors:

a) Lack of a coherent plan: Many contacts cited AKP's inconsistency in offering concrete steps to roll out the democratic opening. Siirt Mayor Selim Sadak said AKP paid lip service to democratization but tried to use the Kurdish issue as a vehicle to achieve it. He said it should have

been the other way around, with the AKP using democratization as a tool to solve the Kurdish issue. He pointed to the changing of the name of AKP's project from "Kurdish Opening" to "Democratic Initiative" and later to "National Unity Project" as evidence of AKP's insincerity toward the Kurds, lack of plan or vision, and prevailing interest in holding on to votes rather than in solving actual problems. Former Social Democratic People's Party (SHP) Mayor of Siirt Dr. Ekrem Bilen said that although he agreed in principal with PM Erdogan's statements on democracy, it was evident the PM alone was driving the process haphazardly and had not created any solid programs. Author Altan Tan said PM Erdogan had become adept at making things seem like they are about to happen, but that nothing concrete materializes because of his lack of vision.

b) No psychological or legal preparations: Human rights attorney Mustafa Cinkilic said AKP's initial announcement of the democratic initiative created great expectations, as it was the first time the government had ever addressed the Kurdish issue. However, AKP made no effort to prepare the country psychologically for the initiative, and the process unraveled quickly with the emotion and ire of families of slain soldiers and the rhetoric of opposition parties. More importantly, he said, AKP did not do any preparatory legal work, citing the example that AKP's goal of bringing the PKK down from the mountains was futile because Article 221 of the Turkish Penal Code was not amended to allow militants to disarm with dignity. Diyarbakir Mayor Osman Baydemir said that AKP had never "answered the hard questions" on the legal implications of the process.

c) Exclusion of important stakeholders: Baydemir said the March 2009 local elections yielded strong support for the former DTP in the southeast, yet AKP had not consulted any of the 98 elected mayors regarding their constituents' opinions about the initiative. "How can you solve the Kurdish issue without the Kurds?" he asked. (COMMENT: Meetings with AKP mayors and provincial chairmen indicate AKP's approach to building grassroots support in the southeast was through its political academy workshops and campaign-style meetings by mayors in AKP-held districts. This approach did not reach DTP grassroots who took their cues from DTP leaders who turned against the initiative when AKP refused to consider as part of the Project open negotiations with the PKK. END COMMENT.)

d) Failure to distinguish between the Kurds and the PKK: Tan said AKP made the mistake of treating the Kurdish issue and the PKK as one and the same. He likened them to organs in the body, perhaps having some relation, but having completely separate functions. The issue, he said, was fundamentally about Kurdish rights, not the PKK. "What happens when you bring all the PKK down from the mountains?" TQ asked. "Does it mean Kurds automatically have rights? Or, if they don't come down, Kurds don't get rights?" The key is democratization, Tan said, and that must be the starting point. Diyarbakir Bar Association President Mehmet Emin Aktar said a distinction between Kurds and the PKK must be made at all levels of government, in particular the judiciary, which has sentenced more than 5,000 minors to long jail sentences in adult prisons for throwing stones at police during pro-PKK protests. (COMMENT: BDP politicians often conflate Kurds in general with the PKK, most notably when, as the DTP, they insisted that greater rights for the Kurds hinged on general amnesty for PKK members still in the mountains and further improvement of the prison conditions of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. END COMMENT.)

e) Same misguided 1990s approach: Contacts said AKP professed to want to make a change, but had ultimately employed the same approach as prior governments. Tan said AKP's approach of first targeting the PKK and not the root of the problem -- democracy -- was misguided and had led to increased polarization. "Will the PKK want to support a process whose openly declared objective is its own elimination?" Baydemir said the key question was "How do we stop the violence?" He said the answer was not to continue

the approach of the 1990s by declaring everyone a terrorist and putting "all" politicians in jail.

f) Loss of credibility: Most contacts declared that AKP lacked the "sincerity" and the courage to see the democratization process through. Sirnak Mayor Ramazan Uysal said AKP should have emphasized changing the constitution to make party closures more difficult and to strengthen individual rights earlier and should have shown a strong commitment to lowering the election threshold for political parties to enter Parliament. Cinkilic said AKP was putting on a good show to garner votes, but had effected no real change and had lost the support of southeastern voters. Sadak said he thought AKP had "given in to the gangs of CHP and MHP" after indicating AKP would take responsibility for solving the Kurdish issue. (NOTE: CHP and MHP are, respectively, the fiercely nationalist Republican People's Party and Nationalist Action Party, which together hold 166 seats in Parliament. END NOTE.)

"AKP IS THE STATE"

13. (C) Most contacts said the recent detentions of BDP politicians -- the 15 incumbent mayors in particular -- were "outrageous and shocking" and attributed responsibility to AKP. Sadak said "AKP has attacked our rank and file ruthlessly," and described how police came to his house at 3 a.m., searched the premises, and took him to the police station in handcuffs. Baydemir said he was questioned for five hours, and now, every time he leaves the office, wonders if he will be arrested again. Bilek said the perception in the southeast is that AKP ordered the detentions. BDP

contacts believe AKP was also behind the closure of the DTP, despite AKP statements condemning the closure of political parties. When asked about AKP's closure case, one BDP politician said AKP embodied the double standard in the justice system: "it's fine to be too Muslim, but not okay to be a liberal democratic Kurd."

14. (C) In Adana, Siirt, Sirnak, and Diyarbakir, pro-BDP contacts underscored that AKP controls both the Ministries of Interior and Justice. "AKP is the state," said former Adana provincial chairperson Zeki Aktas, who continued saying that the state organizes itself under AKP's wing in the southeast. The way in which prosecutors received the 34 returnees from Iraq (coming from both PKK bases in the Kandil Mountains and Makhmour Refugee Camp), including 8 PKK members, in October 2009, bolsters this impression. Cinkilic said AKP had arranged a "special court" for the group at Habur, but the court had no legal foundation and demonstrated the judiciary was acting on instructions from the AKP. If AKP could control the judiciary and law enforcement in October 2009, then AKP could, if it wished, hold in check prosecutors who wished to detain Kurdish politicians now.

PKK ON THE RISE

15. (C) Sadak said the arrests of mayors and BDP members had spurred a spike in PKK recruiting, particularly among university students. At least three other contacts mentioned university-educated recruits, pointing to the anger provoked when legitimate political channels are closed and moderate Kurds, like former DTP Co-chairman Ahmet Turk, are stripped of parliament positions and banned from politics. Aktas said, "If someone like Turk is banned from politics, what kind of chance do the rest of us Kurds have? Can you see this from a young person's perspective?" He said he believed recruitment was up 90 percent after the last wave of arrests.

Baydemir said it was hard to convince people that Gandhi-style civil disobedience was the path to take in the face of continued political and military persecution. He added that this was the Middle East, where mentalities are different. "Every time you kill a militant, you don't make the PKK weaker, you make it stronger."

¶16. (C) Human rights attorney Kemal Derin says anti-Kurdish feelings are very deep right now at the community level, and the Kurdish-Turkish divide is widening. He said PKK's attempt to politicize terrorism backfired after the organization encouraged street protests to legitimize itself, soften its terrorism label and show it had considerable political clout. Instead, he said, PKK actions have created a rift in the Turkish-Kurdish community, reinforcing the Turkish nationalists' perspective that all Kurds are terrorists. BDP interlocutors acknowledged the sustained use of violence -- including street protests -- only serves to reinforce these perceptions, but say they cannot control the "spontaneous and political reflexes" of their supporters, claiming protesters often are reacting to excessive police force. Diyarbakir businessman Sahismail Bedirhanoglu said the opposition has had a hand in reinforcing the impression that all Kurds support terrorism by continuing to lump ordinary Kurds and the PKK together. He said perceptions of secret agendas on all sides were hard to combat: the Kurds want to secede, the AKP has an Islamist agenda, the opposition wants to keep the country under the thumb of the military. He predicted the intercommunal situation will get worse before it gets better.

COMMENT

¶17. (C) From the onset of the National Unity Project, the differing order of priorities and objectives of the AKP and pro-DTP (now pro-BDP) Kurds put them at odds. Both AKP and DTP agreed on the need to stop the bloodshed, but AKP's stated overriding goal was to disarm and dismantle the PKK

and then bring about democratic change. The DTP claimed that its primary objective was to institute meaningful legal reforms to effect democratic changes, which would encourage the PKK to disarm. That AKP did not take on DTP fully as an interlocutor or partner in the process, and DTP's insistence on pushing generally unpalatable issues such as direct negotiation with the PKK, further widened the communication chasm. It is significant that many southeast Kurds seem to view the AKP, which Kurdish voters strongly supported in the 2007 general elections for standing up to the military and the opposition parties, as having gone from "ruling party" to "state." This change in perception reflects a deep feeling of betrayal and means that the region's Kurds now see AKP as yet the latest in a long line of "oppressors" who cannot be trusted. Despite the current impasse, most contacts are nonetheless optimistic about reviving the democratic initiative if AKP can quickly effect meaningful legal reforms to reassure Kurds of its sincerity and takes Kurdish stakeholders with clout in the southeast as partners in the initiative.

Jeffrey

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